

# Houston Health

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Houston Department of  
Health and Human Services



*A Quarterly Newsletter for Advisory Councils of the Houston Department of Health and Human Services*

## Department expands West Nile virus surveillance

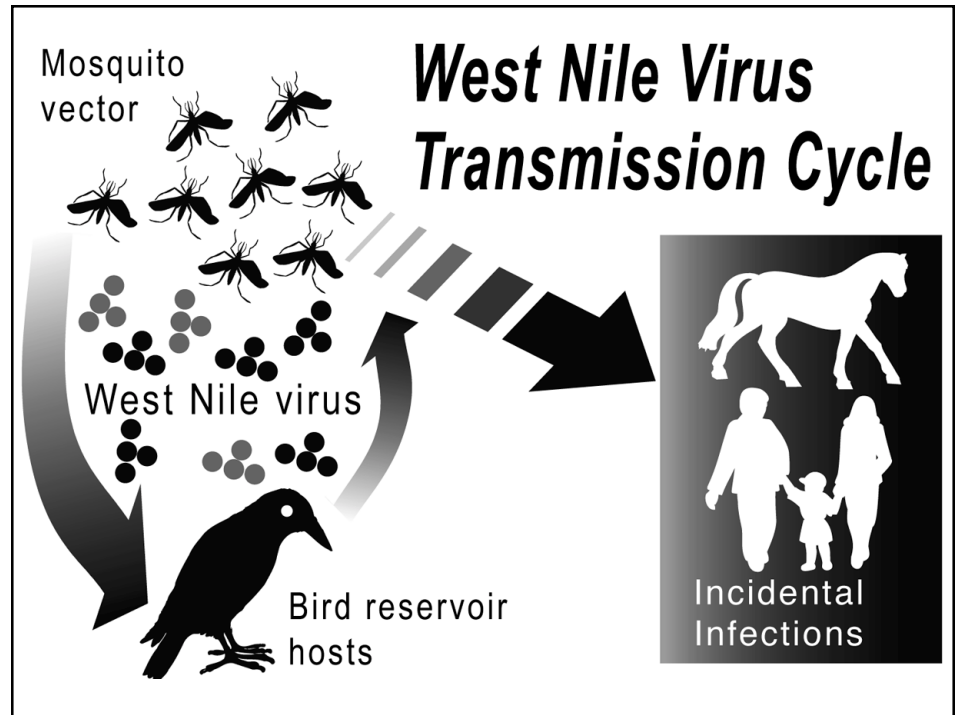
Houston could see its first mosquitoes infected with the West Nile virus this year, signaling a health threat to people and certain animals.

The virus has spread rapidly since its detection in New York in 1999 when 62 cases of severe disease — including 7 deaths — occurred. Health officials in neighboring Louisiana reported their first human case last summer. Although the mosquito season in Houston runs from May to October, spring's warm temperatures provide an opportunity for mosquitoes re-emerge after lying dormant through the winter.

"Houston may soon have its first pools with mosquitoes positive for West Nile virus or perhaps infected birds," said Dr. Raouf Arafat, Chief, Bureau of Epidemiology at the Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS). "The virus might even be here already."

West Nile virus infection, in severe cases, can develop into encephalitis, inflammation of the brain. Still, the probabilities of becoming severely ill or dying are extremely low; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that less than 1 percent of people bitten by a mosquito with the virus will become infected and get severely ill.

Most people infected with the virus experience mild illness with symptoms that include fever, headache, body aches and occasionally skin rash and swollen lymph glands. Severe in-



fections can cause high fever, headache, stiff neck, disorientation, coma, tremors, muscle weakness and paralysis.

Mosquitoes become vectors of the virus after feeding on infected birds. The infected mosquitoes transmit the virus when feeding on the blood of people and animals. Although most infections have been in birds, West Nile virus also infects horses, cats, bats, skunks, chipmunks, squirrels and domestic rabbits.

This month the CDC doubled a grant to HDHHS for local West Nile virus surveillance activities. The \$182,000 grant will enable the department to expand surveillance activities

started in 2001.

The additional money will permit the department to collect up to 300 cerebral spinal fluid and blood samples from people with encephalitis of an unknown cause from eight area hospitals. In the event of an outbreak, the department would collect additional samples.

Last year, HDHHS's laboratory in the Texas Medical Center, with the help of the Texas Department of Health's Laboratory in Austin, tested cerebral spinal fluid from 230 people hospitalized with encephalitis. Those tests found no evidence of West Nile virus.

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# CDC doubles grant for West Nile surveillance

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As part of its surveillance activities, the department will arrange for courier pick-up of the cerebral spinal fluid and blood samples from the participating hospitals, test them for the presence of West Nile virus and provide results in two days. Testing will be free to the patients and hospitals.

The department's lab is the only area facility with the ability to test for evidence of West Nile virus infection in people. Still, all positive tests would need to be sent to the CDC for confirmation and definitive diagnosis because cross-reactivity occurs often during the testing of arboviruses such as West Nile.

The grant will also fund a part-time epidemiologist who will function as the department's liaison to the Harris County Mosquito Control Division, the local agency primarily responsible for pest control and prevention of mosquito-borne diseases.

"The liaison will need to rotate regularly between the department and Mosquito Control so we can quickly find out about any positive pools," Arafat said. "We can help Mosquito Control from an epidemiological point of view figure out a better way of looking at pool sites and positive results."

The liaison will also gather and analyze data and assist with hospital surveillance.

Although the elderly and those with weakened immune systems are at highest risk of severe illness, the virus — once detected in a region — poses a risk to all residents.

People usually develop symptoms three to 15 days after infection with the virus. There is no specific treatment for West Nile encephalitis, but in severe cases people will receive intensive support therapy that may include hospitalization, intravenous fluids, airway management, respira-

## Public Health Importance

The activities of the West Nile Virus Active Surveillance Program at the Houston Department of Health and Human Services provide many public health benefits.

- The program increases West Nile virus and general arbovirus awareness in the medical community.
- The program will rapidly identify cases of human West Nile virus infection.
- Data gathered from human surveillance can be used to target mosquito testing and appropriate control measures.
- The program informs the general public of West Nile virus activity so they can take precautionary measures such as limiting mosquito exposure.
- Rapid identification of human West Nile virus infections in the Houston area provides an opportunity to prevent potential outbreaks.
- Prevention of human infections is the best control measure for West Nile virus as there is no specific anti-West Nile virus therapy available and no vaccine has been developed for this virus.

tory support (ventilator), prevention of secondary infections and good nursing care. Currently, no vaccine exists against West Nile virus encephalitis in humans.

Precautions against mosquito bites can reduce the risk of infection:

- Wear protective clothing such as long sleeves and slacks while outdoors at dawn, early in the evening or at dusk.
- Use an insect repellent with the active ingredient Deet and follow label instructions. Only adults should apply repellent on a child.
- Use other deterrent devices such as citronella and repellent coils.

Keeping mosquitoes out of homes requires the checking of windows and door screens for openings and replacing or repairing them if necessary. Also, openings such as those around air conditioning window units need to be sealed.

Infected mosquitoes, mostly from the many varieties of the *Culex* species, transmit West Nile virus in the United States. *Culex* mosquitoes abound in Houston.

The species survive through the winter in the adult stage in the country's northern states where temperatures are much colder and can kill large populations of mosquitoes. Houston's milder winter temperatures make it impossible to discount the possibility of year-round transmission.

The best method of reducing mosquito populations is to eliminate mosquito breeding sites - standing water. Some species can breed in containers as small as a bottle cap.

Reduce mosquito-breeding areas by eliminating standing water outdoors:

- Remove containers that hold water. Flowerpots, birdbaths, tires, broad magnolia leaves, etc. should be drained daily, in-

*see Eliminating, Page 3*

## Eliminating mosquito breeding sites

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- verted, covered or removed.
- Repair leaking plumbing.
- Keep gutters free from debris and standing water.
- Move drain hoses from air conditioning units frequently to reduce standing water.
- Mow tall grass.

Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast also lie along both the north- and southward paths of some species of migrating birds that journey every year from the northeastern United States to their winter grounds in Mexico and Central America. The birds avoid flying across the large expanses of open water in the gulf and instead, follow the Texas coast.

Health experts believe birds are the principal introductory hosts of West Nile virus into new regions. Birds that fly along the gulf route include the cattle egret, black-crown night heron, turkey vulture and different types of ducks and gulls.



*Tammy Moeller, spokeswoman for Aetna, and Leslie DuVal, President, Greater Houston Alliance for Healthy Communities, present a \$10,000 ceremonial check to Brock Lamont, Chief of the Immunization Bureau at the Houston Department of Health and Human Services, during a recent news conference at the Northside Health Center. The department will use the money donated by Aetna to continue promoting the importance of infant immunization in Houston. It is recommended that children receive 80 percent of their lifetime vaccinations by age two. It is from birth to two years of age when children are most susceptible to diseases and their deadly effects.*

## MAY

### Asthma and Allergy Awareness Month

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America  
(800) 7-ASTHMA  
[www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)

### Skin Cancer Awareness Month

American Cancer Society  
(800) ACS-2345  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

### Mental Health Month

National Mental Health Association  
(800) 969-6642, [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

### National Stroke Awareness Month

National Stroke Association  
[www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org)

### National Anxiety Disorders Screening Day

Freedom From Fear  
[www.freedomfromfear.org](http://www.freedomfromfear.org)

### Clean Air Month

American Lung Association  
(800) LUNG-USA, [www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)

### Mother's Day Comes Early for Too Many of Our Nation's Teens

National Organization on Adolescent  
Pregnancy, Parenting and Prevention  
[www.noappp.org](http://www.noappp.org)

### Hepatitis Awareness Month

Hepatitis Foundation International  
(800) 891-0707, [www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)

### National Stroke Awareness Month

National Stroke Association  
[www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org)

### Older Americans Month

Administration on Aging  
202-619-7501  
[www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov)

### Lyme Disease Awareness Month

Lyme Disease Foundation  
(800) 886-5963

### National High Blood Pressure Education Month

National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute  
Information Center  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)



# Metropolitan MSC meets needs of disabled, elderly

The Metropolitan Multi-Service Center is a recreation, education, cultural, social service and community center. It targets services to people with disabilities and the elderly.

In 1980 the City of Houston asked people with disabilities to identify their greatest needs. The input received formed the basis of a plan to address those needs. That is how the idea for a multi-service center to meet the many needs of people with disabilities in the Houston area started.

In 1988, the Houston Department of Health and Human Services opened the 34,000-square-foot center. It occupies eight acres of land in a park-like setting in the heart of one of Houston's most beautiful neighborhoods. The department added a 10,000-square-foot indoor swimming complex in 1994.

All services at the center are provided free to participants unable to pay. Some of the services provided to individuals with all types of disabilities include

- Recreational activities
- Sports programs
- Wheelchair-accessible workout facilities
- Swimming pool with aquatic exercise classes and open swim times
- Adult and children's art programs
- Summer camps for children with disabilities
- Free health equipment (such as recycled wheelchairs)
- Job placement and vocational services
- Case management
- Information and referral
- Affordable meeting space

"Our staff works with the community to bring in new services as needs arise," said Nick Cavallaro,

community relations specialist at the center. "We also seek advice from the center's advisory council so our services can stay attuned to the needs of the community of people with disabilities."

The Metropolitan Advisory Council represents people with disabilities and meets monthly at the center.

The facility features a multi-purpose room, wheelchair-accessible weight room, indoor swimming pool, landscaped park and a softball field. It also houses various social service agencies and offers the public classroom and meeting space.

The multi-purpose room is a full-size gymnasium with retractable backboards and a moveable partition to divide it into two smaller gyms. The staff can lower basketball backboards to enable children in wheelchairs to play basketball.

The gym can also be used as a theater with the capacity to seat up to 900 people. It features a wheelchair-accessible stage and is suitable for professional performances. The center is home to Illuminations with the Deaf, a deaf theater that has won acclaim for its professional performances.



*Johnnie Stewart works out on a rowing machine as his son Kevin Williams stands beside him ready to help at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center's wheelchair-accessible weight room. The exercise is part of Stewart's rehabilitation from a spinal cord injury.*

The gym also serves as a banquet facility able to accommodate up to 700 people. Caterers can prepare banquets in the full-size commercial kitchen that is also wheelchair accessible.

Another special feature at the center is the wheelchair-accessible weight room, one of only a few facilities of its kind in the Houston area. People with disabilities can work out in this room at no cost.

After a workout, visitors to the center may wish to have lunch in the public lounge. A microwave and snack machines are available for visi-

*see Center, Page 5*

# Center serves as one-stop shop for health activities

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tors. Visitors can play board games or simply wait for their rides. The public address system at the information desk in the main lobby announces when rides arrive.

As soon as they walk through the door, visitors to the aquatic facility notice that the air is warm and humid. That's because the center keeps the 25-meter swimming pool heated to 89 degrees. People with disabilities can exercise in warm-water comfort, which is especially helpful to those with arthritis or joint pain. Aquatic exercise is easy on the joints and a welcome relief to the elderly. Seniors are able to enjoy aquatic exercise until very late in life. In fact, some of the center's participants in aquatic exercise are more than 90 years old. Participants can either take advantage of one of the center's many aquatic exercise classes or exercise on their own during open swim times. The center schedules open swim times twice a day.

When finished with the exercise sessions, swimmers can shower and change in locker rooms especially designed for people with disabilities. There are assisted changing rooms for participants who require privacy or the services of an attendant. Roll-in showers make showering easy for swimmers in wheelchairs.

Participants can enroll in other services for people with disabilities while visiting the center. The social service wing of the building can accommodate up to 18 social service agencies. These 10-foot by 12-foot offices are available to nonprofit social service agencies that serve people with disabilities at affordable rates. The center provides security, a lobby receptionist, maintenance and utilities. Fax and copier services are also available at reasonable rates.

The center also offers classroom and meeting space to community or-



*A group of senior citizens walks across the shallow part of the heated swimming pool during a water exercise class at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center. The class is one of 20 offered every week at the center for people with disabilities and the elderly. Aquatic exercise is easy on the joints, a welcome relief for the elderly. The center also schedules open swim time twice a day on weekdays.*

ganizations. One room comes equipped with a kitchenette to serve food during small meetings. A second classroom features a dividing wall for breakout sessions or small meetings. A third meeting area is ideal for small lecture-style events. All classrooms may be arranged in classroom style, theater style or seminar style. These amenities allow for great diversity and versatility in the type of meetings that groups can conduct at the center.

A beautifully landscaped park and gardens lie just outside the facility. Inside the park children will find a playground and swing sets. Wheelchair-accessible picnic tables and grills dot this portion of the grounds. A wheelchair-accessible walking and jogging trail encircles the park. A number of

fruit trees as well as vegetable beds accessible to people in wheelchairs frame the garden area.

The grounds also include a softball field suitable for the blind to play beep baseball. The bleachers are wheelchair accessible. Behind the bleachers are two tennis courts with lights for after-dark play.

The Metropolitan Multi-Service Center is a one-stop shop of services and activities improving the health and well being of people with disabilities and the elderly. It offers exercise, recreational, sports, training and leisure activities, job placement, case management, free health equipment, information and referral, meeting space, social events, summer camps and athletic competition.



## New program at health centers “prescribes” reading

Books are now part of children check-ups at the seven health centers of the Houston Department of Health and Human Services.

The department joined forces in April with Reach Out & Read - Texas and the Houston Public Library and launched a childhood literacy program.

As part of the program, volunteers read aloud to youths waiting for their clinic appointments to show parents the pleasures and techniques of sharing books with children. During the check-up, health center pediatricians discuss with parents the importance of reading to children, give each child a book and “prescribe” reading.

Most children receive 10 well-child check-ups between the ages of 6 months and 5 years. As a result, every child will have the opportunity to own at least 10 books before entering kindergarten.

The program makes early literacy a standard part of pediatric care at the health centers.

Parents of children living in poverty often lack the money to purchase books or may not have easy access to good children’s books. Children who live with books in their environments and are read to during the first years of life are much more likely to learn to read on schedule.

Reading difficulty contributes to



*Alma Avina, a library services specialist at the Houston Public Library, reads a book to several children waiting for clinic appointments at La Nueva Casa de Amigos Health Center as part of the Reach Out and Read program launched recently at the seven health centers of the Houston Department of Health and Human Services.*

school failure, which increases the risk of absenteeism, school drop out, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy – all of which perpetuate the cycles of poverty and dependency. Studies have shown that children who love to read will have better, healthier lives.

### **Reading Tips for Parents**

**Make reading part of every day:**  
Read at bedtime or on the bus.

### **Have fun:**

Children who love books learn to read. Books can be part of special time with your child.

### **A few minutes is OK:**

Young children can only sit for a few minutes for a story, but as they grow, they will sit longer.

### **Talk about the pictures:**

You do not have to read the book to tell a story.

### **Let your child turn the pages:**

Babies need board books and help to turn pages, but a 3-year-old can do it alone.

### **Make the story come alive:**

Create voices for the story characters and use your body to tell story. Ask questions about the story. *What do think will happen next? What is this?*

### **Obtain a library card:**

Houston Public Library cards are free and available at any branch. For more library information, call 832-393-2222.

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